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RUEHCG/AMCONSUL CHENNAI 0068
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 04 ASHGABAT 000501

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DEPT FOR SCA/CEN (PERRY) AND FOR SCA/AF (NEUMANN)

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [SNAR](#) [TX](#) [AF](#) [US](#)

SUBJECT: SCENESETTER FOR AMBASSADOR NEUMANN:
TURKMENISTAN-AFGHANISTAN RELATIONS

REF: A. A) ASHGABAT 459
[1](#)B. B) ASHGABAT 317
[1](#)C. C) ASHGABAT 169
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[1](#)G. G) KABUL 1570

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Classified By: Charge d'Affaires, a.i. Jennifer L. Brush for reasons 1.
4 (B) and (D).

SUMMARY

[1](#)1. (C) Ambassador Neumann, Embassy Ashgabat warmly welcomes your visit here, which offers us an opportunity to engage the Government of Turkmenistan on a more substantive level on the issue of assistance to Afghanistan. Turkmenistan's President Berdimuhammedov, after just a few months on the job, is committed to maintaining his predecessor's foreign policy of "permanent, positive neutrality," although he has shown a greater willingness than former President Niyazov to engage with his neighbors in bilateral and multilateral discussions, and may promote a less isolationist policy in the future. However, Afghanistan has occupied a unique place among Turkmenistan's neighbors -- seemingly absolved from the typical neighborhood boundaries of "positive neutrality;" Afghanistan received special treatment even under former President Niyazov, albeit the relationship lacked political depth and breadth. Even as Turkmenistan shirked international agreements and avoided "regional entanglement," Ashgabat maintained a positive, yet distant, relationship with its southeasterly neighbor, which appears to fall into a vaguely-defined "comfort zone" for Turkmenistan's neutrality-obsessed leadership. This relationship with

Afghanistan provides an opportunity for Turkmenistan to play a safe international role in providing "humanitarian assistance" through the USCENTCOM's Gas and Go refueling operations. Afghanistan is also perceived as a potential future market for Turkmenistan's products. End Summary.

BERDIMUHAMMEDOV'S NEW NEUTRALITY

¶2. (C) President Berdimuhammedov, inaugurated in February, is carefully forging his own version of Turkmenistan's post-independence foreign policy of "permanent, positive neutrality." Just three months on the job, Berdimuhammedov has already made two international visits -- to Saudi Arabia and to Russia -- and hosted a tripartite summit last week in Turkmenbashi with Russian President Putin and Kazakhstani President Nazarbayev. Indeed, although Berdimuhammedov has a stated commitment to former President Niyazov's policy of neutrality, which is a pervasive and popular motto in Turkmenistan, he appears more open than his predecessor to engage with foreign leaders. The apparent rise of Deputy Chairman for International Relations Rashit Meredov is a reflection -- and perhaps also a cause -- of this new openness, although some observers also suggest that Berdimuhammedov, weaker and less experienced than Niyazov, cannot afford to isolate the country any longer and needs to seek international support.

AFGHANISTAN: ASHGABAT'S INTERNATIONAL "COMFORT ZONE"

¶3. (SBU) Afghanistan President Karzai's attendance at both the funeral of former President Niyazov and the inauguration of President Berdimuhammedov sent a signal of positive cooperation and reflected the generally warm relationship

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between the two capitals. Afghanistan has an embassy in Turkmenistan; Turkmenistan maintains consulates in Afghanistan in Mazar-e Sharif and Herat -- a holdover from Taliban days, when former President Niyazov, in the spirit of neutrality, tried to maintain relations with both the Taliban and the Northern Alliance. There is a natural cultural liaison -- Afghanistan's ambassador to Turkmenistan is an ethnic Turkmen and has been granted Turkmenistan citizenship.

¶4. (SBU) If anything, Turkmenistan's perspective on Afghanistan appears colored by cultural arrogance and a sense of Turkmen superiority -- in development, education, security and stability -- over their southern neighbor. Although some two million ethnic Turkmen reside in northern Afghanistan, the problems that have plagued Turkmenistan's external relations with other neighbors have, for the most part, been absent from the Ashgabat-Kabul dynamic, leaving Afghanistan as something of a comfortable neighbor for "positively neutral" Turkmenistan, even under former President Niyazov.

HUMANITARIAN ASSISTANCE TO AFGHANISTAN

¶5. (SBU) Turkmenistan remains an important conduit for humanitarian assistance to Afghanistan, and maintenance of overflights and the military refueling operation at Ashgabat Airport remain a key embassy goal.

BILATERAL TRADE

¶6. (SBU) Bilateral trade between the two countries mostly centers on energy products, including gasoline, diesel, liquefied gas, and gas-generated electricity that Turkmenistan exports to Afghanistan. Data from 2005 estimated Turkmenistan's exports to Afghanistan at around \$123 million and Afghanistan's exports to Turkmenistan -- mostly fruits, spices and nuts -- at \$32 million.

¶7. (SBU) Although the countries share a 1,200 kilometer border, there are only two routes connecting the countries: the unpaved Imamnazar-Andhoy road, and a short road and rail link between Serhetabad and Turghundi, which connects to Herat. Aside from transportation difficulties, Afghanistanis cite visas -- or rather, Turkmenistan's cumbersome visa process -- as the number one problem inhibiting greater levels of trade with Turkmenistan.

¶8. (SBU) Turkmenistan is interested in expanding trade opportunities between the two countries. Senior government officials from several ministries have told Charge that the government is looking forward to realizing a higher volume of trade through the Imam Nazar border crossing checkpoint on the border with Afghanistan (see paragraph 14).

ELECTRICITY

¶9. (SBU) Since 2002, Turkmenistan has supplied electricity to Afghanistan using Soviet-built power transmission lines at a discounted price. USAID contractors reported in March that Turkmenistan produces 3,200 megawatts (MWs) of power annually. Because Turkmenistan cut supplies to Uzbekistan following heightened political tensions, there is an excess of power at the gas-fired power plant in Serdar (near Turkmenabat, in the country's east) that amounts to roughly 2,200 MW. USAID contractors confirmed that Turkmenistan -- with more excess power than its neighbors -- has the capacity and is expressing the will to sell the 300 MW of electricity sought by Afghanistan.

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¶10. (U) Currently, two high-voltage lines run from Turkmenistan to Afghanistan. The first, from Mary (in Turkmenistan) to Herat, is designed for 220 kilovolts (kV), but operates at 110 kV. Built over three years ago to deliver electricity to Afghanistan, the line is still in good condition and can probably be converted to a 220 kV line in two to five years. The other line, 110 kV, runs from Turkmenistan to Andkhoy and electrifies the majority of Afghanistan around Andkhoy. A third line, still to be constructed, would run from Mary to Tagtabazar to Marcik.

¶11. (SBU) Niyazov said in spring 2006 that he intended to extend the current electricity lines past Mazar-e Sharif and Herat all the way to Kabul. At the current price of \$0.02/KWh, Turkmenistan's potential annual revenue from Afghanistan could reach \$9.8 million, based on a 490 MW Afghan import assumption (ref F). In April 2006, a memorandum of understanding (MoU) was signed between former President Niyazov and an Afghanistani delegation headed by Power and Water Resources Minister Ismail (ref F), providing for delivery of an additional 330 MW above the 165 MW that was being supplied at the time. Prior to the MoU, Turkmenistan in 2006 was exporting about 1.3 GW a year, including 599 MW to Iran and 535 MW to Turkey, as well as the 165 MW to Afghanistan.

DEBT FORGIVENESS

¶12. (U) On February 26, newly-inaugurated President Berdimuhammedov announced forgiveness of a \$4.2 million electricity debt in a phone call with Afghanistan President Karzai. Post understood this sum to have represented the remainder of the original, pre-April 2006 debt, i.e., a new gesture to Afghanistan.

PROSPECTS FOR TAP

¶13. (SBU) Following the May 12 tripartite energy summit in Turkmenbashi, Berdimuhammedov said that although Turkmenistan would move forward with the Caspian littoral pipeline, he

would not rule out other export routes, including to China, Iran, the trans-Caspian pipeline, and the Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan (-India) pipeline (TAP or TAPI). TAP also featured in Turkmenistan's October 2006 Oil and Gas Development Plan for 2007-2030 as a future pipeline option. Despite rhetorical promises, however, most observers here agree that TAP is for now a non-starter because of the security situation in Afghanistan.

CROSS-BORDER SECURITY

¶14. (C) Turkmenistan officials have said that narcotics trafficking is a problem rooted in increasing crop yields in Afghanistan. Both the minister and deputy minister of defense have posited the question of increased poppy cultivation as a security concern to visiting U.S. delegations. Drug trafficking from northern Afghanistan remains an issue of major concern in Turkmenistan, especially as the new leadership has publicly announced its intention to address the drug problem. Embassy Kabul reported (ref G) that in Jowzjan, where planting has been extensive this year, the ethnic Turkmen community continued to be involved in poppy cultivation for its own consumption and to smuggle across the Amu Darya river to Turkmenistan. In early February, Turkmenistan undertook a major drug burn -- the fourth in the last two years -- which was a major media event

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and served, on the eve of the presidential election, to reinforce Berdimuhammedov's commitment to addressing the drug problem in Turkmenistan (ref C).

¶15. (SBU) Construction of a second USG-funded border crossing checkpoint is almost complete at the Imam Nazar border station located across the border from Afghanistan's Aquina checkpoint. On April 9, Embassy Ashgabat staff crossed into Afghanistan for a first-time meeting with Embassy Kabul counterparts, Turkmenistan's First Deputy Minister of National Security, Afghanistan's local political officials and local checkpoint officials from both countries (ref A). The introductory meeting was followed one week later by a UNODC hosted cross-border conference with participants from both the Imam Nazar and Aquina checkpoints and a senior counternarcotics official from Kabul. Embassy Ashgabat is keen to pursue the cross-border dialogue and continues to push this agenda at all relevant law enforcement ministerial meetings. (Comment: Thus far, Turkmenistan appears more interested in benefitting from increased narcotics intelligence from Afghanistan than encouraging an open dialogue between the two governments. End Comment.)

COMMENT

¶16. (SBU) Turkmenistan's generally amiable relationship with Afghanistan stands out among its more troubled historic relationships with its neighbors; under President Berdimuhammedov, who appears more open to at least bilateral cooperation, the relationship could improve further. Turkmenistan's view of Afghanistan, however, is colored by a cultural arrogance and a tendency to harbor concern for the security situation across the border. Your visit should reinforce embassy's efforts to strengthen Turkmenistan's interest in a cross-border relationship that might be founded on security and power issues, but should extend to increased opportunities for trade and education. The limited access points between the two countries and Turkmenistan's strict visa regime, however, are legacies that will keep Afghanistan at arm's length. End Comment.

BRUSH